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DE RUEHSF #0204/01 0461337

ZNY CCCCC ZZH

O 151337Z FEB 07

FM AMEMBASSY SOFIA

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3229

INFO RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL IMMEDIATE 0028

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE

RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE

RUEHZN/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SOFIA 000204

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DEPT. FOR EUR/RPM, EUR/NCE, PM

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/15/2017

TAGS: PREL PGOV NATO MOPS MARR AF BU

SUBJECT: BULGARIA: MOD CONSIDERS ADDITIONAL AFGHAN
DEPLOYMENT

REF: A. SOFIA 114

1B. STATE 13880

1C. SOFIA 160

Classified By: DCM Alex Karagiannis, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: In a February 15 meeting, MoD Defense Policy Director Col. Ivan Milanov gave a readout of Bulgaria's discussions at the Seville Ministerial and outlined Bulgaria's plans for future deployments to Afghanistan. In addition to Bulgaria's previously announced commitment to deploy a mechanized infantry company under Italian command in Kabul (ref A), Milanov said that Bulgaria is likely to nearly double its commitment to Afghanistan by accepting a new internal perimeter security deployment at Kandahar Airfield. According to Milanov, bilateral discussions are also underway with both France and Italy on providing armored transports that would enable Bulgarian troops in Afghanistan to lift equipment-related caveats. END SUMMARY.

Kandahar bound?

12. (C) Col. Milanov said that Bulgaria's consideration of an additional Afghan deployment was prompted by a 2 February letter from SACEUR to Bulgarian CHOD Gen. Zlatin Stoykov, in which he strongly encouraged Bulgaria to accept a PRT mission in Lowgar East or a force protection deployment at Kandahar Airfield. In explaining their decision to focus on the Kandahar mission, defense ministry officials cited equipment shortages (particularly lack of armored transports and body armor) and lack of civil-military experience as reasons why it would be difficult for Bulgaria to lead a PRT mission at this time. The Kandahar mission poses fewer challenges: it would consist of 193 soldiers who would be responsible for inner perimeter security at the airfield.

13. (C) The Kandahar mission has strong support within the MoD -- it has been approved by Defense Minister Bliznakov and the ministry's Defense Council, and logistical details are currently being negotiated with the General Staff. Before the commitment is official, the decision must be approved by the Council of Ministers and ratified by the National Assembly. Milanov stressed that the ministry was moving as fast as possible to plan logistics and prepare paperwork, and that the deployment could be ready for government approval and ratification as early as March.

French and Italians chip in

¶4. (C) On the issue of caveats, Milanov said the GoB was working extremely hard to remove caveats on existing and previously committed forces in Afghanistan, and was limited by two factors: equipment/force protection needs, and framework nation caveats. In order to address the former, Bulgaria had initiated discussions with France and Italy, both of which indicated a willingness to consider loaning equipment to Bulgarian troops. According to Gen. Stoykov, the Italians have made a preliminary offer of 14 Puma armored vehicles, 4 of which would be available for training in Bulgaria and the remainder when Bulgarians arrive in Afghanistan. Col. Milanov indicated that the details of this offer were still being negotiated. Once a deal is finalized, the vehicles will be slated for the (Italian-commanded) Bulgarian mechanized infantry company in Kabul, and will allow transport-related caveats on these forces to be lifted.

What's next?

¶5. (C) While Milanov ruled out a PRT mission "for at least the next six months," he made it clear that he believes it is only a matter of time before Bulgaria leads its own PRT. The Bulgarian Army currently has three staff officers participating in the Hungarian PRT in Pol-e-Khomri and is concentrating on building the capacity (civ-mil cooperation, inter-ministerial planning, equipment) that Bulgaria will need in a future PRT. As the GoB looks toward the future, the expected 2008 delivery of 52 FMF-funded HMMWVs and other force-protection equipment should allow Bulgarian forces to accept more ambitious missions.

Comment:

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¶6. (C) The MoD is clearly seized with the importance of beefing up Bulgaria's presence in Afghanistan. In this respect, it is leaning even farther forward than the rest of the government. We will continue to lobby the MFA and advisors to the Prime Minister and President, but all recognize the importance of NATO's success in Afghanistan. The key will be reassuring them that Bulgarian troops will be adequately prepared for the risks they will face when lifting caveats or deploying to the south. This is primarily a matter of training and equipment rather than political will. In the short term, the MoD has chosen to give priority to lifting caveats in Kabul and deploying to Kandahar Airfield rather than taking on a PRT. We recommend supporting Bulgaria as officers gain experience in Hungary's PRT, while encouraging them to keep their eyes on the prize: a Bulgarian-led PRT in 2008. END COMMENT.

BEYRLE